

The Finest Hours: Upcoming Film Tells Tale of Storm-Torn T-2 Tankers

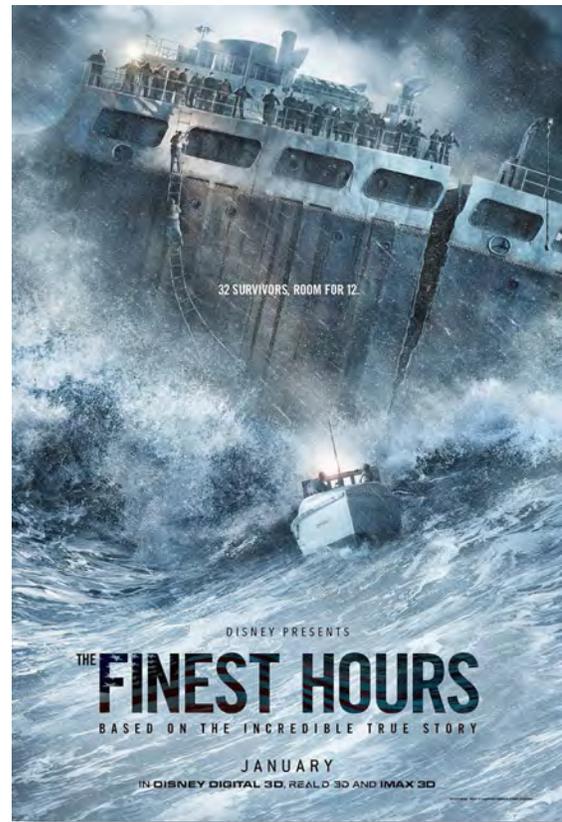
A Disney film due for release in January will relate the mindboggling true events surrounding a horrific storm in 1952 that tore a pair of tankers in half. Only brilliant seamanship coupled with one of the most hallowed small boat rescues in Coast Guard history prevented all hands from taking residence in Davy Jones locker. The film was adapted from a 2009 book co-authored by Michael Tougias and Casey Sherman entitled *The Finest Hours: The True Story of the U.S. Coast Guard's Most Daring Sea Rescue*. Directed by Craig Gillespie, the film adaptation of the book is called *The Finest Hours* and stars Chris Pine, Casey Affleck, Holliday Grainger and Eric Bana, among others. It is set for U.S. release on January 29, 2016.

M.E.B.A. members crewed both the SS FORT MERCER (Trinidad Corp.) and the SS PENDLETON (National Bulk Carriers), T-2 tankers storm-tossed by the violent Nor'easter that raged off Cape Cod, MA in February 1952.

Laden with kerosene and heating oil from Baton Rouge and bound for Boston, the PENDLETON split at 5:50 a.m. on February 18 after being battered by 70-knot winds and near 80-foot waves. M.E.B.A. Chief Engineer Raymond Sybert said he "heard a terrific noise, sort of like an explosion" about 15 hours after the storm began to stir. A few minutes later the ship ripped apart. It happened too quickly for the radio officer to dash off an SOS.

The Captain and seven other men on the PENDLETON's ill-fated bow section were doomed. Power on their half of the ship went dead and they drifted south helplessly. The bow would ground on Pollock Rip Shoal and torrential waves agonizingly smashed into the hulk and plucked away the last crewman spotted alive by horrified onlookers. The ongoing storm persistently beat back rescue attempts. Seven men of the PENDLETON bow had been swallowed by the seas. The eighth was later found frozen in a ship compartment cocooned in newspaper unable to beat the chill.

Machinery and lighting on the stern section were still operational and Chief Sybert took command of the remaining crew and the ravaged ruins of the ship. As the stern section drifted south with a slight port list, the crew gathered flares and smoke pots from the lifeboats but discovered that most were defective. M.E.B.A.'s *American Marine Engineer* (the precursor to the *Marine Officer*) reported that Chief Sybert kept "kicking" the engines astern to prevent grounding the vessel on a sandbar off Chatham, MA that could have spelled disaster. But the worrying list of the stern became ever more pronounced, and with their half of the vessel taking a terrible beating, the Chief decided their only choice was to beach on the sandbar. They



This should be an exciting film. It hits theaters in late January 2016. (Photo courtesy of Walt Disney Studios).

accomplished the feat without further toll on the remaining crew. Sea conditions defied Coast Guard attempts to board the beached stern section for almost a week but ultimately, in a heroic and daring operation that many considered a suicide mission, a Coast Guard team aboard rescue boat CG-36500 was able to extract the crew members from the broken shell of the ship stranded on the sandbar. 32 of 33 crewmembers survived from the stern section. Nine in all perished from the PENDLETON.

The FORT MERCER was also loaded up with kerosene and fuel oil and was sailing from Norco, Louisiana bound for Portland, Maine. At 8 a.m. on February 18, the ship cracked near the #5 cargo tank. Despite a succession of worrisome pops and cracks over the next several hours, the ship stayed intact until around 12 noon when it finally snapped in half. A crewmember told the *New York Times*, "It happened like that - there was a noise as though a ship had rammed us. Then she lifted out of the water like an elevator. She gave two jumps. And when she'd done that, she tore away."

continued

Finest Hours continued

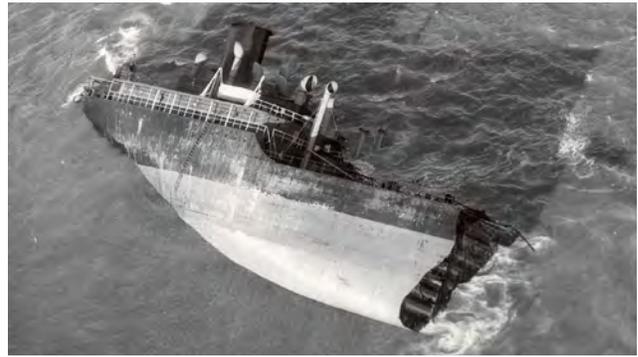


Coast Guard crewmen from the YAKUTAT pulling in the last two survivors in a rubber boat from the bow section of the FORT MERCER. The tanker sank into the chilly waters 20 minutes later. (Photo courtesy of USCG).

After the sickening split on the FORT MERCER, nine crewmembers were trapped on the bow section which was partially submerged. Five of them met their fates, but four others, including the Captain, found salvation after another staggering Coast Guard rescue mission. 34 men remained on the stern which was floating free. M.E.B.A. Chief Engineer Jesse Bushnell took control and rallied the stricken crew. The engineers were able to maintain control and narrowly avoided a collision with the bow section as the relentless sea did them no favors. The Coast Guard again mounted a rescue mission and 21 shivering and grateful mariners were offloaded to the three cutters on scene – the *Eastwind*, the *Acushnet*, and the *Yakutat*. But 13 men chose to stay with the stern including the M.E.B.A. officers. The stern half of the vessel floated free and drifted southwestward for several days. The *New York Times* reported that, “The ‘stay-putters’ had light and heat because the boilers and almost all the ship’s machinery were in that section. There was plenty of food in the galley.” The broken stern half of the ship drifted 40 miles away from the bow and eventually hooked up with a pair of salvage tugs which took it in tow to Newport, R.I. Chief Bushnell said, “It was the worst storm I have ever experienced. I am sure any ship would have broken in two in such freakish weather.”



The Treasury Department would honor over 20 U.S. Coast Guardsmen who helped rescue 70 men from the PENDLETON and the FORT MERCER. Four members of Coast Guard Motor Lifeboat CG-36500, who helped recover the crew from the stern of the PENDLETON, were singled out for the Gold Lifesaving Medal for ‘extreme and heroic daring.’ It is still widely considered as the greatest small boat rescue in Coast Guard history. In the photo, the gold medal CG-36500 crew decompresses at the Coast Guard station hours after the wild rescue. Left to right are boat pilot Bernard Webber, Engineman Andrew Fitzgerald, Seaman Richard Livesey and Seaman Irving Maske. The Gold Lifesaving Medal was also awarded to Engineman William R. Kiely, Jr. for the rescue of two crewmembers from the FORT MERCER bow. (Photo courtesy of Cape Cod Community College).



The stern of the PENDLETON beached on a sandbar where a Coast Guard rescue effort was able to recover 31 of 32 crewmembers on that half of the ship. (Photo courtesy of USCG).

The bow of the PENDLETON was sold for scrap. But while being towed, a section of the ship got snagged and tore away on the Pollock Rip Shoals near Chatham, Massachusetts where it rests today. The stern of the ship lies twisted and scattered near Chatham, 1 mile east of Monomoy Island. It remains a popular dive spot. Soon after the incident, the FORT MERCER’s bow was blasted into a watery grave by Coast Guard guns after determining it was a hazard to navigation. The ship’s owners later attached a new bow to the stern section of the MERCER and the vessel was rechristened as the SAN JACINTO. That ship continued the MERCER curse when an explosion a dozen years later blew the vessel in half off the east coast of Virginia. The remains of that ship were then crafted into two new vessels – the SEATRAN MARYLAND and the PASADENA – ships that continued operation without the drama or frightful ordeals endured by their predecessors.



Survivors from the PENDLETON’s stern section at the end of their ordeal getting ready to go ashore. (Photo courtesy of USCG).